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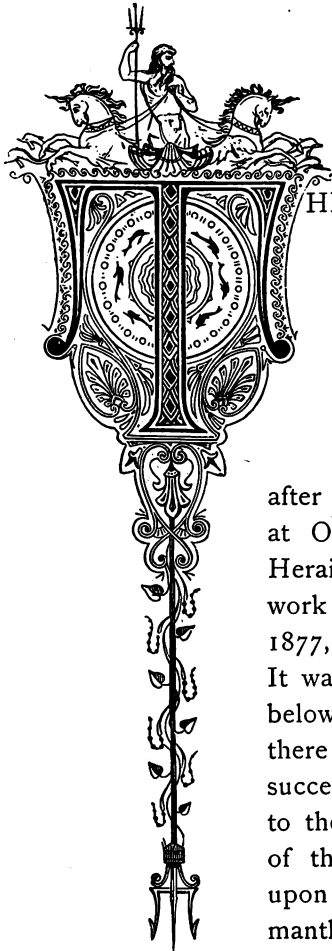
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# PRAXITELES'

## HERMES WITH THE INFANT DIONYSOS.



HERE has recently been added to the treasures of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts an excellent cast of the finest piece of sculpture now known to exist,—the Hermes with the Infant Dionysos, of Praxiteles. This group, if we except the marbles of the Parthenon, is the only piece of sculpture that can with certainty be set down as an original work of one of the great Greek masters, and no one can look at it without feeling that it is worthy of the very greatest.

Pausanias, in the seventeenth chapter of the fifth book of his *Itinerary*, after enumerating the various ancient chryselephantine statues in the Heraion at Olympia, says: "In later times they dedicated other statues in the Heraion, and among them a stone Hermes bearing the Infant Dionysos, the work of Praxiteles." In the ruins of this same Heraion was found, in May, 1877, the identical group seen by Pausanias seventeen hundred years before. It was mutilated, indeed, both arms being broken off, and both legs a little below the knee; but the trunk was unharmed, and upon the matchless head there was not so much as a scratch. Later, in April, 1878, the excavators succeeded in finding a piece of the right arm, extending from the shoulder to the elbow, and the entire left arm and hand, with the exception of parts of the fingers. This arm, which still bore the torso of the infant, rested upon the trunk of a tree, over which fell to the ground, in rich folds, the mantle on which the arm with the child rested. All these appear in the cast.

It would require a large volume to exhaust all the points of interest connected with this group. In the present sketch I shall consider only two,—the subject undertaken by the artist, and the manner in which he has treated it.

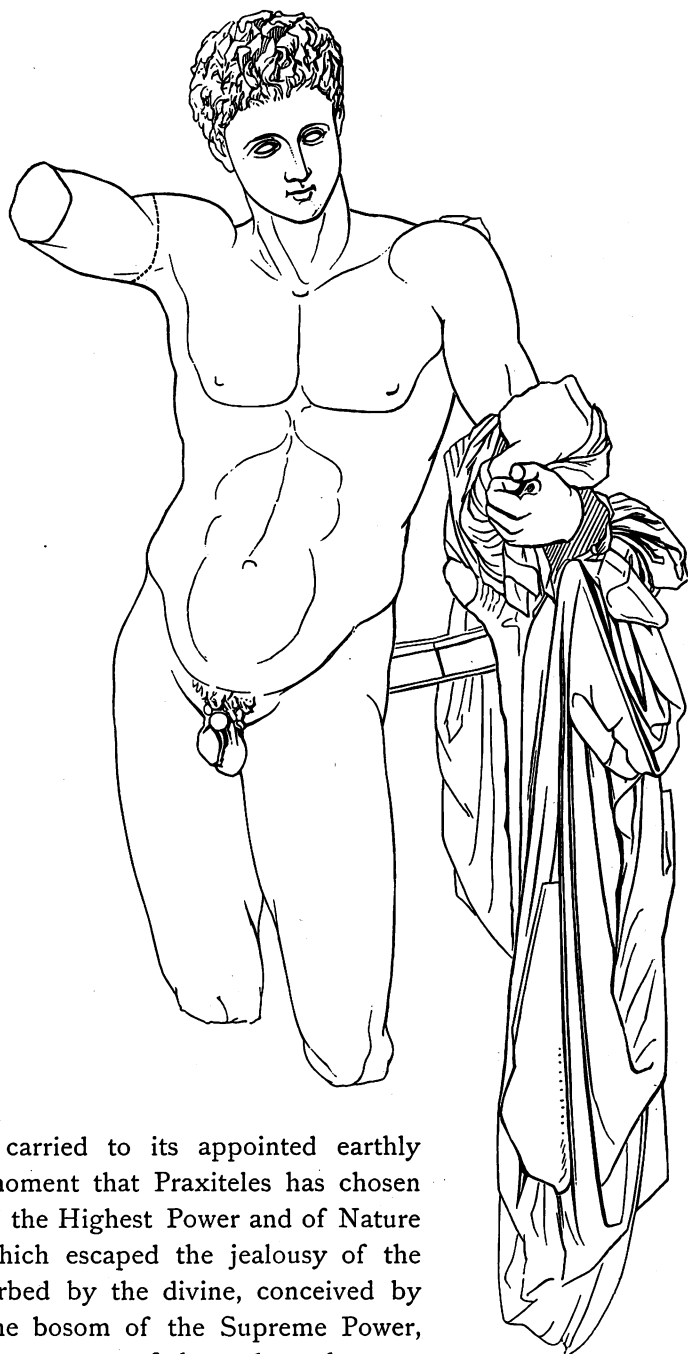
The myth which connects the infant Dionysos with Hermes, unlike most of those selected by artists for plastic representation, belongs to the inner and mysterious side of the Greek religion,—to that side which artists of earlier periods shrank from alluding to, not only through graven image or likeness, but even by word or sign. In the hundred years that had passed between the prime of Pheidias and that of Praxiteles, great changes had taken place. Not only had Athens, fallen from her proud position as "mistress of a thousand isles," ceased to be able to enlist the services of her great artists for state enterprises, but, under the teaching of Sokrates, Plato, and Aristotle, not to mention smaller and less beneficial thinkers, men had become thoughtful, curious, and inclined to look for a meaning other than the superficial one under those myths which formed the garment of their religion. Thus, when in the days of Plato and Aristotle, contemporaries of Praxiteles, art retired into private life, it found itself called upon to express, not the ideal forms of divinity and its self-sufficient acts, but the motives and meaning of these acts, and their inner relation to human weal or woe. The sense of dependence

upon the Infinite, however vague in respect to its true object, had been deepened, and men were examining the old cords that bound them to it, trying to persuade themselves of their strength. Thus it came to pass that those myths which lent themselves most easily to a philosophical interpretation, or a variety of them, took precedence, in thoughtful and anxious minds, of those that were merely explanatory of ordained and customary observances; and there grew up a kind of half esoteric religion, in which an earnest philosophy sought to find support and sanction,—to find, in fact, that element of reality which reason has to accept and can never produce or fully explain, the immediate *is*, as distinguished from the derivative *must be*. Of the myths of the former class, there was not one that fell more readily into the forms of philosophy than the mysterious story of the birth of Dionysos, so plainly symbolical of the ways of Infinite Nature.

The worship of this divinity, which, almost beyond a doubt, originated with the Thracian element in the Greek population, and was closely connected with that of Demeter, Persephone, and the Muses, assumed, in course of time, many foreign elements, chiefly from Oriental religions, so that when the Dionysiac myth came to take a settled and connected form, perhaps about the time of the Peisistratids, its manifold and discordant features required the aid of a somewhat transparent allegory to bring them into harmony. It was in this way that a large part of the so-called Orphic literature arose, so full of the vague sublimities of Oriental pantheism, and so prophetic of intellectual dotage. In this literature, Dionysos, or that combination of nature deities, originally distinct, which went under that name, was a central figure, and one so Protean that it was ready to assume any shape which mysticism might require for the adumbration of its indistinct yearnings. In the days of Praxiteles, these yearnings were neither so vague nor so intense as they afterwards became, when the world continued to grow less and less inhabitable, and men, bound in a universal thralldom, looked elsewhere for that share of happiness which their nature demanded and their surroundings refused. The creative fancy was still masculine and vigorous enough to impart definite form sufficient to conceal, and yet to reveal, that mystical struggle for meaning which mistook itself for what it sought. Praxiteles and his contemporaries stood upon that highest, brightest pinnacle of artistic consciousness, which, on the one side, crowns a long spiritward ascent from the rude, characterless copying of mere material objects, and, on the other, overhangs a darkening deep, in which descending spirit loses its definiteness and commingles with the imperfect, transitory phantoms of fatuous matter. Praxiteles, while holding fast to that clear-outlined beauty, which is the outward sign of the inward presence of spirit in matter, could, at the same time, make his productions convey, or at least suggest, in the most attractive combination, those truths which men were vainly calling upon deaf Nature to unfold to them. That such was his aim we may convince ourselves by looking over a list of his works, and comparing the subjects of them with those chosen by Pheidias, or any of the earlier masters. These preferred to represent actions taking place either altogether within the circle of the gods and demigods, or else altogether within the human circle. Praxiteles, on the contrary, chooses for his art those myths which place the human in relation with the divine, or the powers of nature in relation with the Supreme Intelligence. Most of all he delights in those personalities that combine in themselves the divine and the human. The half-human Satyr and the half-divine Dionysos are his special favorites. Five times, at least, did he represent the latter, three times in connection with other gods and twice alone; while his works that deal with the class of divinities to which Dionysos belongs are still more numerous. In them all his endeavor was to combine beauty with revealing expression in their highest compatible degrees. Nowhere, perhaps, did he find a subject better suited to his taste and that of his time than in the myth which brought his favorite Dionysos into connection with Hermes. In Hermes, the divine messenger, he found the representative of all the gods,—of Divinity, as condescending to and communicating with Nature; in Dionysos, he had the embodiment of Nature, in every phase from lowest to highest, as struggling up toward the Divine, its father and home. Rude enough, indeed almost

revolting to our ways of feeling, is the old myth with its anthropomorphic symbolism. Zeus, the Supreme Power, begets, by Demeter or Mother Earth, a daughter, Persephone, the world of Vegetation. While she is still young and fair, ere she is borne down by Hades to the gloom of the Under-world, she becomes a mother by her own father, and gives birth to Zagreus, or animal nature, whose highest form is savage man, rude, impetuous, untamed, and boisterous, yet progressive and promising to rule the world. Though, as yet undeveloped, he amuses himself with childish toys, he excites the jealousy of the Titans, the destructive forces of nature, who rend and devour him piecemeal, all but his heart, which is carried quivering up to Zeus. Zeus, vowing vengeance against the Titans, devours the heart, but afterwards plants it in the bosom of the human Semele, daughter of Kadmos, who would, in due time, have given birth to Dionysos, had she not rashly demanded to look upon the Supreme God in all his majesty. In granting her wish Zeus consumes her with his lightning, and saves only the unborn child, which he sews into his thigh, there to complete its pre-natal existence. In course of time the child is born, and delivered by its father to his son Hermes, to be carried to its appointed earthly nurses, the nymphs of Nysa. It is this moment that Praxiteles has chosen for his group. Dionysos—the offspring of the Highest Power and of Nature in all its successive phases, the heart which escaped the jealousy of the Titans, and which, after having been absorbed by the divine, conceived by a human mother, and returned again to the bosom of the Supreme Power, has been born anew—is intrusted to the messenger of the gods, to be conveyed to the earth, of which he is the glorified, divinely-informed epitome. Hermes has reached the ground, and is stopping to rest. Like a good messenger, he does not sit down or lay aside his staff, but, having thrown his mantle in thick folds over the trunk of a tree, he is resting upon it the arm which bears his charge. Such is the myth, and such are the motives of the group. And how wonderfully has Praxiteles embodied them!

Hermes, represented in something over life-size, is a model of youthful male beauty. The weight of his body rests partly upon the right leg, and partly upon the left arm, which reposes upon the tree trunk.<sup>1</sup> This attitude allows the body to assume that beautiful curve, which not only expresses ease and balance, but allows the muscular structure to display itself with great



<sup>1</sup> The cut in the text is a reproduction of one of the figures in Dr. G. Treu's *Hermes und der Dionysos Knabe*. It is only given as suggestive of the general arrangement of the group, the full beauty of which cannot be expressed by such inadequate means.—EDITOR.



variety; and this is further increased by the position of the arms, the right being free and raised, the left engaged and lowered. Thus, without any strain, every muscle of the body is shown performing its function, and so interwoven with the whole as to give the appearance of a living organism, obedient to even the slightest movement of the governing will. The broad shoulders and vigorous, well-expanded chest, the round, muscular arms, the slight and gradual narrowing toward the firm loins, the light, graceful, strong, but not over developed thighs, all show that ideal perfection aimed at by Greek physical culture, of which Hermes was the patron. But, after all, the most wonderful portion of the figure is the head. In trying to describe it, one feels how powerless language is, and how far it may be transcended by plastic art. The only words that suggest themselves are the vague, tabooed ones, which signify only the speaker's incapacity, and not what he means to express. "Perfect head" is vague enough, and yet that is the truth about it. Imagination will strive in vain to picture one more lovely; indeed, to most imaginations it will be a revelation of unconceived beauty. Young and beardless, with short, thick hair gathering naturally into rich, crowding locks, it leans a little forward and a little toward the raised right arm, forming with the full, round muscles of the shoulder and the outward curve of the chest a treasure of outline such as is hardly found in any other figure. What a contrast it forms with the baldness of the Melian Aphrodite, in which the head leans toward the lowered arm! The neck of the Hermes, which resembles that of the Ludovisi

Hera in being almost as broad as the head, gives to the governing and governed parts of the figure a unity which makes us feel that they will never fall into discord through tyranny or rebellion. The face is the most personal that ever was cut in marble,—so much so, that one feels himself impolite in gazing at it too steadily. The forehead, cut clear against the certain curve of the hair, shows the majestic, concentrated brow of Zeus softened in one more broad and tender, but passing, strong and Zeus-like, into the straight Grecian nose, whose nostrils are slightly expanded, as if by the warm breath of habitual deep, but calm emotion. The chin is round, soft, and full, with the slightest suggestion of a dimple, while the moist eyes, directed dreamily upon the distance, and the ripe, exquisitely curved lips, express the clear divinity of tenderness, untarnished by hard-counselling experience. It is the face of a youth in whom the richness and strength of opening manhood are fused with the grace and tenderness of maidenhood, as he folds his arm round his helpless infant brother. Such capable tenderness neither sculptor nor painter of modern times has ever been able to transfuse even into the face of the Prince of Pity.

As already said, the right arm of Hermes, from the elbow downward, is lost; but there can be little doubt that the upraised hand held the serpent-wreathed *caduceus*, the emblem of death and resurrection to immortal life. The left hand, which is so finely sculptured as to show the veins on the back, appears to have held the Dionysiac thyrsos, which, in a symbolic way, told the story of the group, the wreathing vine and ivy recalling the original birth from Persephone, and the cone at the top the heart which escaped the devouring jaws of the Titans. (See Suidas, s. v. *κωνοφόρος*.)

Owing to a statement of Pliny's (N. H., XXXIV. 87), that the elder Kephisodotos was the author of a group representing Hermes feeding the infant Dionysos (*Mercurius Liberum patrem in infantia nutriens*), some archæologists have taken it for granted that the Hermes of Praxiteles (who was probably the son of this same Kephisodotos) must have represented the same subject, and would therefore place a bunch of grapes in his right hand. This conclusion is not unnatural, and a good deal might be said in its favor; still, it is difficult to believe that Hermes feeding Dionysos would be represented standing, or in the genre-picture attitude of tempting him with a bunch of grapes. We have no proof that there was any close relation between the Hermes of Kephisodotos and that of Praxiteles. A much better guide to the restoration of the latter is unquestionably the Eirene with the infant Ploutos, attributed to the same Kephisodotos, formerly in the Villa Albani, now in the Glyptothek at Munich.<sup>1</sup> This group, which is not in all respects correctly restored, represents Eirene, clothed in the full diploidion, with a long upright rod in her raised right hand, and bearing the infant Ploutos on her left arm, the hand of which, as is shown by representations on Attic coins (see tail-piece), held a cornucopia. Round this the infant passed its left arm, while it extended its right toward her face. As Eirene held the emblem of Ploutos, so, I think, Hermes must have held the attribute of Dionysos, viz. the thyrsos, which the infant may have been touching with its left hand, while it rested the right on the shoulder of Hermes, and looked up in his face. A fragment of the right hand is still to be seen on the shoulder.

Thus, by means eminently simple, did Praxiteles body forth, in forms of surpassing beauty, the ascent from matter to mind, just as the idea was passing from the dim portentous shadows of mythology into the clear light of philosophic conceptions, and the myth and its meaning could both be expressed. What a dialogue of Plato was to the intellect, or a tragedy of Sophokles to the imagination, that a group of Praxiteles was to the eye, as large in conception, as perfect in finish. Indeed, nothing can exceed the finish of the Hermes. It furnishes us with a new standard whereby to try all other works of sculpture; and shows us how far those of them which we have hitherto considered great and inimitable fall short of what Greek art in its best days was able to accomplish.

THOMAS DAVIDSON.

<sup>1</sup> It is only a copy, though a good one, probably made in Roman times. Brunn, judging from certain peculiarities in the copy, thinks that the original was in bronze. There is, however, good reason for doubting this, and for believing that the marble original was found in the seventeenth century near the church of St. Dionysios the Areopagite, in the place where it is known to have stood. Being taken for a Madonna and Child, it was broken to pieces by order of the iconoclastic archbishop, lest it should be used as an argument against the orthodoxy of the saint by the Romish image-worshippers. Curiously enough, Friedrichs says of the Munich copy that it "affects us almost like a Christian Madonna" (*berührt uns fast wie eine christliche Madonna*). And this is true. A cast of this group has recently been added to the Museum of Fine Arts at Boston.

